Obligate Mutualism

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by bowhuntress

Summary

"They had a strained conversation after mail call, all those months ago, walking slowly across the barren, muddy ground, and John wouldn't look at him when he told him he was afraid that people would only ever know the person he was becoming.

Gale could see it hanging over him, then: the spectre of the person John thought so diminished and so unworthy of being known. The person he was so afraid of becoming. And Gale thought, back then 'what kind of person would not want to know every aspect of him? What kind of person would not love every version of this man?'"

...

Or: Gale, through it all.

Notes

meh. might be a few typos but I've been looking at this doc for so long it's burned into my eyes and i can't see any mistakes anymore. enjoy!

It's Crank that breaches the subject. The rest of the guys have been tiptoeing, Buck knows, around the subject and around both John and Gale. John, they give a wide berth, perhaps because they don't want to instigate a fight with him, because John's been on edge, even after their scuffle. But it surprises Gale that they're avoiding *him* as well. Until Crank catches him one quiet afternoon. John's God knows where. Buck might be worried, but his mind reasons that with how loud the man is, Gale would hear it if there was trouble.

"You okay Major? We know — well, we know you and Major Egan are close, and well he's not doing too good." Crank's wringing his cold, stiff hands.

"I'm okay, Crank," Gale takes care to reassure. He slaps his hand over his shoulder and pats it gently. Crank is one of his boys. He needs to take care of him. It's bad enough for morale that he and Bucky don't currently show a united front. "Thanks for checking in. And I'm sure Bucky'll be just fine. 's just a little stir-crazy, right?"

Crank bows his head with a long sigh. "Yeah, it's just. He's always been there for us, you know? After tough missions. So, we wanna be there for him too."

Gale does know. He hadn't been lying, when he'd written that note for command, to tell them that John's a good leader. John's this bright light, and it calls to the men like moths to a flame. He's a beacon, always so goddamn blinding.

"You know, this isn't him. It's this place, and it's these nazi fucks, and whatever happened to him after Münster. He didn't mean it." Crank kicks at the floor. He's skirting around the subject; around the fight that Bucky pretty much instigated. It's good that the men *perceive* John and can tell that it's so far out of character for him to be this way. It's good that Crank is here on to plead on John's behalf, like Gale needs to be convinced that John's not feeling well. That he didn't mean to start a fight.

And the thing is, this time, John did mean to start a fight. He just does that sometimes. He did ask Biddick to sock him in the face, or so the rumours go. John is uniquely positioned to know how to wind Gale up. But they haven't spoken about it much, because neither of them is the type to discuss these things. Yet there's just an assumption that it's forgiven — John's forgiven for starting the fight, and Gale's forgiven for finishing it. There's barely a bruise on John's nose. There's barely a

mark on Buck's ribs.

"I know, Crank," he says, gently. "I know. He'll be okay, alright? You keep looking out for him, and I'll keep him sane and in check. We're gonna get out of here."

Later, when it's time to sleep, John is snoring away on his bunk, the long lines of his body curled to keep warm, and Gale watches his back and carefully considers his conversation with Crank.

It doesn't take a genius to realize that John's been miserable. And they all are miserable. That's prisoner life for you. But mostly the men manage to be miserable together, and that brings them some measure of comfort; brings them some measure of peace. There are moments of hope and joy, interspersing the long stretches of boredom and nothingness. But John hasn't been there. He doesn't play cards with them very often unless Gale prompts him. He sits or lays in his bunk, and he sleeps late. He actually sleeps a lot; Often and shallowly, bouts of napping disturbed by intense night terrors. Gale doesn't know how many nightmares he gets. John's quiet when he gets them, so it doesn't wake them up, but Gale's found him a few times, awake and despondent in the middle of the night, eyes flinty and haunted in the dark.

It was very worrying at first, when Bucky showed up at camp late with this head bashed in and pupils the size of quarters. It still worries Gale a little bit, to find him catching up sleep in the middle of the day. And when John's not sleeping, he spirals, really.

Gale thinks he understands. John's been champing at the bit the last few weeks, and it's ramped up to restless periods where he just goes outside and runs and screams about baseball like a lunatic just to exert himself. John's like a herding dog confined to a backyard with nothing to herd — stripped of purpose. Or maybe a wild horse being broken, angry about being caught at all, lashing out to anyone trying to approach him: he's been doing it with words the last few times Buck's tried to talk to him, and now it seems it's escalated to violence.

Gale hates comparing him — comparing them all to animals. He needs to give them all the dignity of being considered human. He needs it to survive. But it's hard not to compare them to a pack of unruly barn cats or ornery outside dogs when they're fenced in, fed scraps and screamed after. Left to their own devices in the cold. All that's missing is the collar and chain, and even though there's not one physically, the metaphorical collar keeping them there is the desire to survive, the

Germans high up in their observation towers, armed with guns that could tear them apart at the first try to fly the coop.

Buck's been around farms his whole life. Wyoming – Cowboy State. If there's one thing he knows better than planes, it's animals. Gale's been bitten plenty of times to various degrees of severity, by a significant portion of the animal reign. Gale's been bucked off and kicked and head-butted and crushed against the ground.

He's learned that animals that are usually well-behaved act up when they're scared or in pain.

John's not so different. John's sweet and mischievous and abuzz with energy. But ever since he appeared at Stalag with his head cracked open and his body beaten blue and black, John's been more subdued than Gale's ever seen him.

Subdued isn't the right word, either. Maybe at first, he was. When he was too exhausted and too injured to move or talk much. Now, 'twitchy' sounds more appropriate. Fiddly and twitchy and almost nervous. All pent-up energy and no way to let it out. Except maybe fighting. And John can't fight the guards because the Germans would kill him. And John can't really fight the men because they're theirs to take care of. So, John fights Gale, his equal and friend.

And Gale ends these fights, one way or another.

There are moments when Gale resents him.

He feels guilty almost immediately after he does. It makes him sick to feel that way, but it's been creeping up on him the last few weeks when Bucky's stubbornly keeping away, when he smiles at him sharp enough to cut, when he gripes and snipes and argues like a child.

Sometimes Bucky makes it easy to resent him. It was easy when he came out of the cabin crowing like a madman about them working on that stump. He resented him when he was laying in the dusty clay ground, poking at his outstretched hand with his foot.

But sometimes, Bucky just exists in this new normal they have going on, and Gale resents him all the same. He resents that John's not as much a leader as he once was. He resents that he had to step up to be a guiding force pretty much on his own, and that sometimes, it's hard to have John, struggling, hurting John, as another man he has to take

care of instead of as someone to help him take the weight on.

Whenever it abates, he's always left feeling empty and dirty. He feels ashamed of being so angry at John's faults.

He knows his own shortcomings. He knows sometimes people need gentle and reassuring, and sometimes he can't give it to them. He remembers calling Friedkin a son of a bitch for wanting to bail out at Regensburg – maybe a different man might have been more tactful.

He knows he can seem removed. Closed off. He doesn't emote like Bucky does; It's never been in his nature to be loud. They've always balanced each other that way, as well. Buck steady and sedate. Bucky bold and boisterous. Both stalwart and loyal in their whole self.

So resenting John, for being emotional and wounded, and for not providing Buck with the support he needs makes him angsty at the thought that maybe he's not being the right emotional pillar for him in return, either.

The resentment never stays very long. It's always fleeting. A moment of weakness Buck is quick to leave behind. And besides, as much as John can be easy to resent these days, he's also damnably easy to love. Buck never goes to sleep angry at him; how can he, when John always takes care to say, 'night Buck,' no matter how tense the day has been. The man always rasps his knuckles on the wooden bedframe twice, like clockwork, and it's a reassuring routine.

How can Buck resent John when the man is sleeping, face scrunched and brows furrowed even in sleep, cheeks ruddy red whether it's from the warmth or the cold, and he looks so… Makes Gale want to… How can he resent him when John climbs in his bunk during the worst of the winter, when they don't have enough wood to care for a fire the whole night long and settles as small as possible on the edge of the bed.

How can he resent him, when, even clearly so despondent, he'll share his food with whoever needs it most. John tries, always, to make it better for their guys. Even if he doesn't always manage to, Gale loves him for it.

They had a strained conversation after mail call, all those months ago, walking slowly across the barren, muddy ground, and John wouldn't look at him when he told him he was afraid that people would only ever know the person he was becoming.

Gale could see it hanging over him, then: the spectre of the person John thought so diminished and so unworthy of being known. The person he was so afraid of becoming. And Gale thought, back then 'what kind of person would not want to know every aspect of him? What kind of person would not love every version of this man?'

He told John that they would bide their time and get back out there. That this war would end. He knocked their shoulders together and told John: "This will be the 'you' worth knowing."

But now, on some days when John's isolated himself or when he's hard-pressed to wake up, to eat, to wash – Buck feels like he's losing him. And. It's cruel — it's so damn unfair and so cruel and so selfish to feel like he's lost Bucky when Bucky's *right there*. Why can't Gale just be happy that his best friend is alive and with him? Why does it feel like John is slipping between his fingers? How has he become afraid of the very thing John was worried about?

John's becoming that spectre that was hanging over him back then. It scares the shit out of Buck.

There's a morning not long after their fight that John's watching the horizon through the metal barb-wire fencing, and Gale is watching him, and there's a foreboding sense that something's… wrong. Something's about to happen. Gale's always known when John's about to do something stupid; it's how he knows to push him back into his seat when the man tries to fight the brits, or when to grab his shirt to try and stop him from embarrassing himself in front of the men.

So, he sees John take one step, and then another towards the fence, and there are alarm bells sounding between his ears. He's on his feet and sprinting (jogging, really, he doesn't want the krauts to get twitchy and shoot at him) and inserting himself right in front of John's body. Bucky doesn't even stop. He lets himself run into him, chest to chest, and Buck reaches out to steady him, stop him with hands on his chest.

John's eyes are still on the fence over Gale's shoulder.

"What the hell are you doing," he hisses, and he finds out he's angry. He's seething. All that worry towards John, all that love and care, and John's ready to throw it all to the side and get himself killed. "The hell is wrong with you?"

John tries to take another step, but Buck digs his heels, and he shoves

him back once, and then again. Bucky trips on the uneven ground, arms windmilling. He doesn't fall because Gale takes pity on him and grabs the front of his coat. He shakes him for good measure, still spitting mad.

"John, I swear to God, if you try again, I'll knock you out and carry you back to your bunk." He's dead serious, as well. And that, at least, seems to get through to John and cut him out of his trance.

"Like you could take me down, *Major*," he smiles, and it half-reaches his eyes.

"I could. I can. Don't test me, Egan," Buck pokes him hard in the chest, and then feels just a little spike of remorse when John winces, rubbing at the spot with a grimace. "John, you have to calm down. It'll get better, I swear, but you can't. You have to stop," he huffs, frustrated with his words, "you've gotta stop trying to get yourself hurt."

"I'm not trying to get hurt, I'm trying to get out."

"Bullshit."

"I am," John spits. "I wanna get out of here. I want to get back into the air. I want to get back home. Do you?"

"Of course I want to. What the hell are you even asking? I want to get out of here, but you're not getting out by running straight into the fence, are you insane? You want to escape you've gotta plan this stuff. And right now you're –"

"What," John scoffs bitterly, "out of control?"

"Well, John," Gale snaps back. "You've got to admit that you're not the most in control right now. Come on," he stops John when the man opens his mouth, presumably to refute it. "I can see it, Bucky. The men can, too – hey," he grabs his shoulders with both hands when John turns his head aside, cheeks red and face twisted; Buck recognizes shame. "They're worried about you. *I'm* worried about you. Nobody's laughing at you, no one's… I don't know hating you for it behind your back. We just. We want to help, but we're not sure how to. You don't let anyone help."

"There's nothing to do, Buck. That's the thing. The one thing that would help me would be to jump the damn fence and disappear in the woods, but we can't."

“So it’s escape or nothing? Bucky? Escape or die? There’s no compromise, nothing else would bring you a little peace until the war ends?”

“Aren’t you tired of watching after me?” John shrugs Buck’s hands off his chest. He doesn’t answer the question, and he’s back to avoiding his eyes. “Aren’t you tired of having to push and pull me around. I don’t know how to get better, Buck, so why don’t you just leave me be. It’s not your fault. I’m not your responsibility. So, you can just leave it. Just. Leave me alone.”

“I can’t, ‘cause if I stop watching you, you do something like this!” He gestures between them, where their little scuffle has left gouges in the sandy ground. “I’m not gonna leave you alone, you hear? Stop trying to shake me, and stop trying to walk into a German gun, you lunatic. You don’t want to do it for yourself? Do it for me. Stop making me worry. Stop making me scared. *You’re scaring me*.”

It makes John’s face fall, twist into something fragile and pained. John’s *strange* about his own feelings, and about being hurt. He has a strange relationship with pain. Sometime John’s cruel with himself. But he’s never – ever cruel about Buck. Not even in his nastiest moments. So, the threat of getting himself hurt (of getting himself killed) doesn’t seem to resonate with him, but the idea that he’s hurting Buck? That has him reeling, and Gale can see it.

“You’re scaring me, Bucky. Stop it. Please,” he settles his hand on John’s shoulder, right against the crook of his neck. He feels him swallow. “Please.”

John doesn’t say anything, but he jerks his chin, and he turns around, stalks right back into their cabin.

There’s no more fighting after that.

John Egan gets blackout drunk sometimes in his worst moments, and he sets off to start a fight; he’s the first man Buck’s ever known that actively wants to lose it.

Or rather, it’s not exactly that Bucky wants to lose. It’s that he wants it to hurt.

Buck has spent the better part of the last four years attached at the hip with the man. He would have had to have been blind to miss it, John’s peculiar *habits*. John pulls at the soft skin around his nailbeds, and he

pulls on his hair when he's frustrated. Gale's seen him reopen scabs, again and again, and though Buck's guilty of doing the same thing sometimes, there's something obsessive about the way Bucky can't just let it lie. He can't let it heal.

He saw the man burst a huge blister on the back of his heel once, back when he was breaking in his boots. John had pulled the skin apart from the rubbed-raw flesh and flicked it away, leaving the blister open and oozing. Buck remembers having watched him befuddled by the act, but he recalls thinking that maybe it was easier to dry and heal it that way (It's not – he's learned since. Leaving the blister intact is much safer, and much less painful).

The thing is Buck can't really understand why. Why the man would purposefully inflict more pain than necessary on himself. Buck's used to slapping the hands out of his mouth when John's biting at his cuticles. He's used to pulling him out of his fights before he gets too banged up.

So it's not hard to recognize those patterns with John now in camp, punishing himself for some reason – keeping away from benign activities that would make life more bearable, away from the few good foods they receive from the Red Cross packages, away from the small comforts. The flesh around his nails is always raw nowadays when Buck can't be with him at all moments of the day to look over him.

Makes Buck consider biting his own nails, but they're so dirty he decides it's not worth eating grime.

A few days after his capture, when he was new and unsteady, he was first introduced to the awful feeling of seeing familiar faces from the 100th appear at the Stalag from the failed Münster attack; everyone he debriefed told him that John had been there and by all accounts had ejected successfully. But John didn't show up. And for a few days, Gale thought for sure he would – turn up like a bad penny.

But a week and a half passed by, and by that point nobody from the Münster attack was unloading from the trucks delivering fresh meat to the camp anymore, and Buck despaired.

He felt guilty, really, about not being as grateful as he should be when his boys from the 100th showed up. He was glad, always, to see them alive. But none of them were Bucky.

Buck doesn't like to think of these days. His mood was a pendulum, back and forth and back and forth between grieving the best man he knows because chances are slim that he would have escaped capture, and stubbornly keeping faith because Bucky Egan is a stone in his shoe – by default, he's a pain that just won't go away no matter how hard Buck tries to shake him. John's a fighter, so he must've had made it.

He kept his smile on his lips for the men, he sat down with each one to chat about how they were and what they needed, but he felt John's absence every passing hour. He kept his smile on, and he took on all the weight of leadership back on, and he dearly missed the second set of arms that used to help him shoulder it.

And then, suddenly and without warning, John Egan limped back into his life between the barb-wire fences with half of his face blackened and swollen, and a smile so bright Buck couldn't be mad at him for making him wait. They held each other's eyes until John had to turn to march into processing, and Buck found a scared, vulnerable part of himself soothed. Bucky was alive. Bucky had made it.

John emerged from the processing station half-conscious and collapsed into his arms, smelling like blood, smoke, fear-sweat, and days of unwashed skin, and Gale asked 'what happened to you', again and again until he grew tired of not getting a response.

One of the medics had a look at Bucky for good measure. Pronounced him tentatively not-dead for the moment. The man grimaced as he'd prodded gently at Bucky's head and came back with bloody hands, and they had to sew a few stitches in there. The wound was already half-scabbed and inflamed, messy with congealed blood and, to the good doctor's dismay, encrusted with mud. John moaned and yelled in a pillow when the doctor scrubbed it clean, and Gale held John's hand until he passed out right in time for the stitching. Small mercies, Gale supposed. He kept holding Bucky's hand throughout that, too. Just in case.

"What happened to his head, do you think?" He asked the medic in passing, while the stoic man was pushing the needle into soft skin. Buck couldn't watch. For all that he'd seen extreme violence, injuries beyond what he thought possible before the war, he was still queasy about needles.

"No clue. Maybe he whacked it on the bomber when he jumped. Maybe he 'chuted onto a tree. Maybe the krauts banged him up.

Whatever it was, it was pretty violent. You'll hav'ta check him in the next few days."

Gale had to look for nausea, changes in personality, confusion, memory loss, and a whole bucket of other possible symptoms. But mostly Bucky was alert when he was conscious. Seemed a little confused on how he got the stitches, but considering he was lights out when they were put in, Gale wasn't too concerned.

Those first few days, when John was too busted up to move and he kept sleeping, on and on, and on, Buck spent the time at his bedside filling him in. How Gale got there in the first place ('funny story, John; involves a pitchfork and me damn near pissing myself'), and how the camp worked. He talked about the guys. Bucky for his part looked happy enough to listen on. Sometimes he would listen with his eyes closed to avoid vertigo, would crack a wise joke, or hum in sympathy at whatever Buck was telling him.

But whatever conversation they would have, John wouldn't talk about what happened in the in-between. Gale asked just once, one day when John was feeling better. Bucky had shut down like nothing John had ever seen from him. His eyes had flattened. He was frightened, Gale recognized. So, he dropped the subject. He figured that if John wanted to, he would tell him at some point.

Except John never said a damn thing. The infection in his head wound finally cleared up, but whatever was eating up at him kept festering.

Buck had to keep him from scratching off the scabs on his face and head for weeks afterwards.

Things don't quite settle, after their talk near the fence, but they don't escalate, either so Buck considers it a minor victory.

Bucky tries to step back up to leadership, though it's clear some of the men are still worried about him. They humour him, though, and the peace seems to settle back across their group.

John's still having trouble sleeping at night, still sleeps rough during the day, but he stops trying to goad Gale into fights, and doesn't try to walk into gunfire. Buck still needs to make sure he's eating enough, though. They're all losing weight, slowly but surely, and with the bags under his eyes, and the new hunger-pang frame wrapped in his big coat, John looks like an overgrown kid in need of a nap.

It's muddy from the rain again, and Buck's out – he left John sleeping after a rough night, and that's when Brady comes and finds him with the guys, working on another stubborn stump in the ground. Gale straightens from where he's been crouched, immediately on edge when he spots Brady's lips in a thin line and the tightness around his eyes, and he drops everything to meet him halfway.

"What is it," he asks in a hushed tone, leaning into the man's space.

"It's Major Egan. I found him… I tried talking to him, but I don't think I'm getting through."

Alarm bells. Immediately those goddamn alarm bells. He grabs Brady's sleeve. "What did he do," he demands urgently, "where is he? Is he hurt?"

"What? No. Buck, sorry. I should have said it differently," Brady winces, hands up, and Gale realizes he's been manhandling the man. "He's alright I think, only," he leans in, "I found him crying in the cabin, the kind of crying you can't shake. I can't get him to stop or talk to me."

Buck sighs. He pats Brady on the shoulder, half in apology for jostling him. "Good man, Brady. Thanks for telling me. I'll go check on him."

He's a few steps away when Brady's voice reaches him again: "Is he going to be okay?"

And isn't that the question. He sends a strained smile Brady's way. "I'll make sure of it. Don't worry."

The cabin is empty, except for John, hunched over his own lap with his head in hands, shaking like a leaf in the wind. If he's still crying, he's being very quiet about it. Otherwise, he seems alright. No injury to be concerned about. Gale sighs.

"Hey John," he says quietly, not to disturb the silence in the room. He comes to settle a hand on Bucky's nape. He feels the tremor under his palm, and the skin there is cool, and goose pimpled "You cold?"

Bucky sniffs and clears his throat, shakes his head but doesn't raise it from his hands. "Nah. I'm okay." His voice is wobbly and congested. They stay like that for a moment, John folded over himself and hiding away, and Buck standing guard over him, with what he hopes is a grounding touch. He can't help himself; John's hair looks soft from the quick wash the day before, and he scratches as the short hair behind

his ears. If he were to move his hand, he knows he might feel the faint grooves of the scar at the back of his skull, where he was hit some time after Münster.

It still rankles that something was able to hurt John so much, somewhere as vulnerable as his head. Buck wonders if that's what keeps him up at night, sometimes.

"Was it a nightmare?" he asks, and John just shakes his head again, weakly.

"Ah, you know. Just one of those days, Buck." He finally unfurls from his hunched position, and Buck lets his hand dislodge from John's head.

"Yeah?" Gale carefully plops himself next to him on the cot, settling their thighs together.

John hums as he scrubs his palms against his face. His eyes are a little irritated, perhaps the only evidence that he's been crying. That and the frankly distressed look about him. "I'm fine."

"Right," Gale side-eyes him. "You want to talk about it?"

John takes a few deep breaths. "No, I'll go find Brady and, I don't know. Say sorry for scaring him. Can't go spooking my bail-out buddy."

"You're still shaking, Major. Take a moment."

Bucky scoffs weakly and clenches his fists like that might make him stop shaking. There's an insane, clearly flak-happy part of Gale's brain that wants to grab his hand and hold it. He wrestles it back deep under his façade of calm. They sit in silence for a little while. Their shoulders rise and fall in turn.

"So," Gale hesitates to break their peace, but they need to move on. Somebody's bound to get in the cabin at some point. "Was it a nightmare?"

"'s it really a nightmare if it's the middle of the day?" Bucky stubbornly digs his heels. He scuffs the bottom of his boot against the rough wood of the floor like a child that's been caught.

"Don't be pedantic."

“I have no clue what that word means, buddy,” John snorts.

“John. Come on.”

Bucky sighs. The ever-familiar tightness around his eyes that’s settled there ever since he was captured is making an appearance. “Yeah. It was a nightmare. But there’s nothing I can do about that, now, can I? No handy dandy pills, no booze to drown it away. So, I just gotta be a big boy and take it.”

He stands and brushes his pants, and Gale senses he’s back in shaky territory.

“John,” he stands and finally takes John’s hand. Gentle, gentle, like you’d touch a spooked horse. “John please.”

“It’s okay, Buck – ‘s just a nightmare. It’s not real. I’m fine.”

Gale clicks his tongue. “Are you? I mean, are you really, John?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say Gale.” His real name sounds like a plea for something. It’s not a tone that Gale hears often from John. It’s not a tone that he wants to hear from him.

“I want you to get a grip. I want you to look me in the eye and tell me you know we’re getting out of here alive, and I want you to mean it.” I want you stay with me. Don’t go away, don’t get so deep in your head that you can’t get out. Don’t hide away in the cabin to cry alone.

“Again, with that goddamn –” John tries to wrench his hand away from Buck’s but finds no give. “‘We’ll get out, John,’ and ‘we gotta be patient, John,’” Bucky pitches his voice low, to match Gale’s. “It’s been months. It’s been months and we’re still here! We’re dying! Slowly!”

“We’re not dying, John. We’re living,” he squeezes John’s hand to make his point, warm, strong, calloused, and alive.

“Surviving’s not living, Buck.”

Gale sighs deeply. He closes his eyes. “But it’s not dying, either. I eat those awful potatoes, and it’s shitty and not a lot, but after, I’m not as hungry – I’m not dead. I go to sleep, and the bed is uncomfortable as all hell, but I wake up and I feel rested – I’m not dead. I talk with the boys, and there’s nothing new that’s happened, but I get to learn about them – I’m not dead.”

Bucky rubs at the scar on his eyebrow with his thumb, clearly frustrated because Gale's right. His chest is heaving like he might start sobbing again. "Yeah, well I hate it. I hate it, Buck," he says with a tremulous edge to it. John's eyes settle on him at long last. "I know you don't like when I say things like that, Buck. But sometimes I wish they'd have finished the job." And he sounds so wretched saying it, too. So goddamn tired.

Gale doesn't know who 'they' are. He thinks probably it's the krauts that captured him; Whoever was involved in him getting violently beaten up after he jumped. He says it very quietly, voice a little raw around the edges, and Buck feels his heart speed up, suddenly struck by how scared he is that John's gonna keep getting reckless and mean until he does something the Germans really take offence with and shoot him dead. Bucky would welcome it. It fills Gale with some sort of inescapable dread.

"I will never forgive you, do you understand, Major? You make me get out of here without you when the war's over and I won't forgive you. I don't want to see you get shot down by the krauts," he says tightly.

"I haven't even tried to get out since last time," Bucky protests, but it's a weak thing.

"Good. Don't try again. Not without me," he presses his knuckles against John's chest, just strong enough that the man can feel it through the coat. "Not without me, you hear?"

Gale and John are coming out of there together; Come hell or high water. Either marching through the fences as free men or ducking German bullets. Together. And John seems to hear what Buck means, underneath his words. That given a good plan and a right opportunity, he would go with him.

"Can't get anywhere without you; I'm the stone in your shoe, remember? Where you go, I go."

Gale huffs. "That's right. A little pebble, really. Not so sharp, so it don't hurt my foot."

Bucky's lips quirk, something mischievous but gentle. His hair is astray, probably from running his hands through it, and Buck… can't resist that persistent urge scratching at him to reach out and smooth a wayward curl back. Whatever that means.

He thumbs at John's face on the way down, at the divot over his eyebrow, where there's only a small brown scar and bump remaining from the gash. John closes his eyes with a heavy sigh, and he leans into his hand.

"'m just so tired all the time, Buck," John croaks.

"Yeah, I know, John."

"We've gotta get out of here, Buck."

"We will, John." He doesn't promise because he can't, not when it could all go to shit, but it's a near thing. "Just relax, okay? Sleep, read a little. Take is easy. And you – you come to me, when you start feeling like shit, alright? We'll talk, or we'll wrestle in the mud or something."

The other man sighs. "I hate that you need to baby me. I'm not a kid, God." John digs his bony fingers into the meat of his own thigh. It's more grumbly than sincere, in any case, and his cheeks are an endearing ruddy red. "I'm a damn Major, not a… a uh, damsel in distress."

"I like taking care of you. I like you alive, John Egan. You understand?"

Bucky leans his weight forward to wrap his arms around Buck's shoulders, quickly and sort of stiffly. He pats at his back like it might make the gesture less intimate, but they hold steady for a moment, and it feels just right.

"Hmm. Same. Couldn't take thinking you might be dead. Not knowing – messed me up. I missed you." Gale can feel the rumbling from John's voice into his chest and against his ribs. It's nice to be touched gently and carefully, after months of rough handling. He squeezes the man one last time before breaking apart. John's definitely getting thin under those layers. Gale endeavours to scrounge something extra to give him this week.

"Missed me so much you had to bail out to join me here," he teases.

Another soft huff of laughter. "Something like that."

Gale thinks of these few days at the Stalag when Bucky was missing in action. He wonders how it would have felt to have their roles reversed. If Gale had been on leave and Bucky's fort hadn't come back.

Yeah. Gale understands. *Something like that.*

Sometimes, he wonders how John sees him. Whether he also has a spectre of war-time Gale hanging over his shoulder. Should he be afraid of people only knowing the man *he's* becoming? This man who is always hungry, always cold, and always tired. Because he feels like Buck Cleven's slowly sinking into the mud, weighed down by the size of Major Cleven's responsibilities on his own shoulders. Sometimes, he feels for the grooves on his cheeks where there used to be long gashes, and he thinks oddly that so many people will also only ever know him with the scars on his face.

With their men it's easier. They only have to see the surface of him – what he projects – cool, calm and collected, in control. They see Major Cleven, and it's what they need of Buck: the strong pragmatic leader, without falling into pessimism. It's not that Gale doesn't care what they think of him. It's more that he knows how to be what they need. It's easy to put on the act.

But with John Egan, it's harder. That's because they've known each other for years, and Gale knows Bucky a lot more intimately than he does his boys. With John, he can put up his front all he wants, but John always seems to be able to see right through. And John doesn't need the Major. John needs Buck, unwavering in his friendship, able to salvage the soft bits of John that are being cored out of him by captivity and keeping them safe until they're free again.

Gale wonders if he measures up to John's expectations of him. He wonders if he's succeeding on that front, or if his spectre (shaped like the man he's expected to be) is somehow sucking all his ability to care for his best friend out of him.

There was a time where John was keeping Gale afloat instead of the other way around. Gale remembers feeling muddled and shaken after that first flight – that failed mission – and he remembers Regensburg, and John quietly reassuring him they would both make it in Telergma.

Mutualism. It's a mutualistic relationship, what they have. Gale and John depend on each other. They benefit from the relationship in different ways, but when they're together, they're both better for it.

What a pair they make – John and Gale, holding each other up somehow, fighting their ghosts.

The allied forces are very close. Suddenly, they're plotting. They don't know what for, but they are. Plotting to escape, to survive, to march, to be freed. And it's like John's awake for the first time in a long time. He starts eating like he enjoys it again. He starts listening in on conversations that don't have anything to do with escaping. He laughs more. Plays checkers.

It's a relief, really. To have him back on his feet, feeling purpose. It reminds Buck of the earlier days of their capture when they had to sneak around to build their radio. How Bucky was always so attentive to seek out the various trinkets Gale would need, and how he would be so damned pleased to present them to him like a magpie with shiny stolen things. John had called him his "little kriegie Marconi", so fond of it all.

It feels hopeful. John's smile starts reappearing bit by bit. It's like a breath of relief that all the men from the 100th take at once. It seems like, with their newfound purpose of preparing for all eventualities, they're going to make it through together.

Buck keeps an eye on Bucky, though – it's not that he doesn't trust that John is indeed getting better. It's just that Buck's eerily reminded of his elderly neighbour; she'd gotten ill, and sicker and sicker for months, and then suddenly for a few days, she was miraculously better; a second lease on life, it seemed. And then she still died that same week, taken by the illness. Sometimes people just feel better right before they go. And Buck's worried something awful that John's in that period of lucidity, right before getting taken by what ails him.

Then the men from the 332 arrive, and Bucky sits on stairs right behind him to chat. Gale's been content to leave the new men be, so far, has accepted their presence in their cabin without much fanfare. But Bucky talks in his ear like the angel on his shoulder, and he says something about maybe involving them, and if Bucky thinks they should be in, then so does Buck.

That's how he meets Alexander Jefferson. Good kid, with a good hand at drawing, maps especially. Buck mentions it to John quietly on one of their walks across the camp, and John says: "our little kriegie Da Vinci to your kriegie Marconi," with a twinkle in his eyes. It makes Gale huff a laugh.

Together, their little squadron trains and prepares. The weather is turning back to freezing, slowly but surely, and with it the mood in the Stalag turns uneasy, just as it had done the previous winter. Ill

weather makes ill men, and their bodies are already chipped away by hunger. There's no give, no inch of superfluous fat, and no more cats for soup.

But John's good mood keeps. Gale stops feeling like he has the man on suicide watch.

Gale catches John and Alex quietly chatting together one night, Bucky splayed on his bunk and Alex by the window. They're snickering like schoolboys, and a cursory glance at what Alex is drawing explains why. What had clearly started off as one of Alex's kriegie pin-ups has devolved. The dame now has wings like a great bat, and horns out of her head, and Alex is erasing her dainty Mary Janes and replacing them with clunky soldier boots.

"What d'you think Buck. Would you like a dance with her," Alex chuckles, carefully running his pen over the page.

"Oh no, Alex. Major Cleven here," Bucky pokes him in the ribs, and he bats at his hand in good nature. "Major Cleven here doesn't dance."

"I danced with Meatball," he protests weakly.

"Meatball's the dog," Buck explains to Alex's raised eyebrow. "Meatball don't count, Buck." And he jabs his fingers into his side again, and this time Buck catches it before it lands, and they wrestle for control, each trying to poke the other in the soft parts of their stomachs. They laugh quietly and breathlessly, under Alex's careful, knowing gaze. Buck lets himself fall on top of John, pinning the taller man under him.

"You know for a kriegie you've still got some weight to you," Bucky wheezes from under him.

"It's all those damn potatoes – ow."

Bucky throws him off and raises his hands in mock surrender, blinding smile turned on. They stay like this for a long time, on their backs, side by side, occasionally giving prompts to Alex to continue his drawing. They're pressed close enough in the confined space of the bunk that Gale can feel John's chest expanding with every breath, ribs moving, steady. He can feel the vibration of John's voice where they're pressed together, when he speaks softly with Alex. It's very warm. John's hand brushes his thigh where it's wedged between them.

It lulls him right into sleep.

Despite all things pointing to the contrary, Gale isn't blind to the fact that John is maybe, just perhaps a little bit in love with him.

It's always been a light-hearted joke with the men, that the two of them were indeed war-tested lovers. For every jab at Curt being John's little spoon, there were three more about Gale being his big one. They both let it roll off them, because it is well-meaning in any case, but through the years, there have been several times when John's looked at him or said things to him that have Gale go 'oh'. Perhaps there is some truth to the matter.

Buck grew up with a gambling father and a carousel of eccentrics in the middle of dirt-poor, rural Wyoming. The houses in his hometown were so far apart that you couldn't see your nearest neighbour, so Gale's never had to contend with nosy people. People kept to themselves, and there was an unspoken agreement that whatever happened within the comfort of one's home was their own business. The two elderly women who boarded together a few lanes down definitely kissed within eyesight of Gale when he was a child – never bothered him too much. His father's only altar was the guichet at the ticket booth where he'd place his bets; he never was a religious man.

It's never bothered him that some men prefer the comfort of other men. And, as a major overseeing a lot of young, excitable guys, he's definitely heard and seen things. Bucky's fooled around with some guys in town, careful enough not to be overt around their men, but always open enough around Buck that he notices it. It's always left Gale feeling on edge for some reason, but ne never got around to look at the feeling too closely.

So the fact that John might be in love with him doesn't surprise him. No. But stuck in the middle of Germany, a year into their imprisonment, he suddenly needs to contend with the more-or-less recent development that he might reciprocate the feeling.

He thinks about him sometimes (more and more often as John regains some of his liveliness). John Egan – big hands and a pretty, pretty smile. Eyes that pinch at the corner, some striking shade of blue, that handsome widow's peak with the stubborn curls. Fine-boned around the face, now carved through by hunger, but still. He's a lovely man. He's aways known that, objectively, but on a personal level Buck finds him lovelier still, with the squinty smiles, the solid shape of him.

A little bit of a shock, really, when Buck first thinks 'I'd quite like to

kiss him.'

It's scary, and Gale very much doesn't want to be in love with another man in his group, if only for the fact that being in love with a man at all is terrifying enough on its own. But there's also the fact that if Gale accepts it, then John becomes this all-consuming burn in his chest – he becomes something Gale needs to be worried about all the time, he becomes something *more* that Gale can lose. Buck can't lose John under any circumstances. It would break him, he thinks. But he thinks if John were his lover, it would be worse, somehow.

Inappropriately, while they're remanded to their bunks one cold, rainy day, Gale finds himself wondering how John is in bed – what he's like. Bucky's an inveterate sweet-talker and a flirt, but he thinks about John's reckless habits, and he remembers an offhand comment John made at some pub one night, something like 'I like a bit of rough,' and somehow, he gets the sense that John prefers being on the receiving end of that bit of rough, rather than doling it out in bed.

He flushes when he thinks about it – too inexperienced in those matters to know much about it, so the flashes he gets are pretty tame. Still, he can picture the curve of John's throat, how soft his hair would feel if he were to just… pull. Flashes of squeezing and grabbing at skin, biting gently into flesh, just enough to make a mark.

He thinks maybe if John would let him Buck would show him soft and gentle, slow. John deserves someone nice.

They're sitting on the steps of their cabin, watching the slow snowfall. Buck has his chin laying on his crossed arms, trying to keep his body compact for warmth. John hurt his wrist playing ball with a group of men, and he's sulking, watching the rest of them play a game over in the open field. Buck yawns and his jaw cracks. He's tired from nights upon nights burning the candle at both ends, planning and preparing. John looks similarly tired, eyes swollen from scrubbing at them. His has his shirt collar pulled over his chin, grumbling at the play ongoing in front of them.

"That shouldn't have counted," he snipes. Buck's not entirely sure what he's complaining about, so he just shakes his head, fondly, as the man continues raving. "Can you believe that? And no call," John knocks their shoulders together.

"Can't believe it, Bucky."

“Ump is blind as a bat.”

“Damn disgrace,” Buck clicks his tongue, still pulling his leg.

“Right? ‘Cause that shortstop should’a – oh enough, you little punk,” Bucky pushes at him with more strength when he realizes Buck’s messing with him. A smile creeps on both their faces and they wrestle arms for a moment. “Worst person to talk about it; you don’t know jack about baseball, you heathen.”

“Not everyone can remember games play-by-play by heart, Bucky. You’re just that special. Really, I don’t see how you can remember all’at,” he snickers at John’s eyes bugging out.

“Mmh. See, I still cannot believe you boring bastard don’t like sports, Buck.”

“Don’t like that I don’t like sport, that I don’t dance, that I don’t drink. What do you even like about me, then?”

“I like your aftershave.” John deadpans, and Buck would laugh, but it still rings true. “No kidding. It smells nice, and it’s easy to recognize. It’s very,” he clears his throat, “very you.”

“Well, then.” Buck hasn’t put on that aftershave in a year since he went down. He was wearing it on that mission. A few of the men commented on it, back then, but he never realized John picked up on it. The bottle’s probably gotten packed in his locker after he went down; it’s probably back with his folks. When they get out – *when*, not if – Buck endeavours to find a new bottle of the same brand to wear.

There’s a long, somewhat awkward pause after that, and then Buck blurts out: “I like your hands. Got nice hands. They’re always warm, too.” Buck’s hands are perpetually cold.

John shoots him an oblique look from the corner of his eye, fleeting and then gone again. After a moment he decides on something and slowly reaches out. He removes his hand from his glove and presses the back of it to Buck’s cool cheek. His hand is warm, dry, skin rough from hard work and cracked from the cold. Buck feels his eyelashes flutter against John’s finger. The moment stretches.

A creaking noise close-by startles them both and John damn near jumps, rights his posture and shoves his hand back into his glove. Swivelling around, Buck spots Alex emerging from their cabin. He doesn’t look very surprised to see them sitting together.

“Majors,” he greets, notebook tucked under his arm.

“Alex,” they both reply at the same time, maybe just a little too quickly. Alex’s eyebrow raises but he doesn’t mention anything, and he sits on John’s other side, sidling up so the three of them are pressed together. They return to their companionable silence.

Buck’s cheek feels very warm against the chill.

They get the order to march one dark, freezing night. They pack up everything just like they plan, and Buck gathers his letters, which he tucks inside his coat. He and John keep shouting over the rabble, trying to keep their men in line. Buck steers everyone outside their cabins while Bucky directs men into the column, telling them all to stick together. The ill and injured make up the rear of the line.

When Buck finally sees the last of his men out the door, he joins Bucky outside where the man is looking over at the fences. It’s eerily similar to the picture he had painted a few months ago, except maybe that his posture is a little more relaxed.

John says he isn’t thinking about running or so he says – not in this weather – but they share a look and there’s a little bit of doubt in the man’s eyes. Buck gently slaps at his back. This is one more hurdle they’ll cross together.

“You warm enough?” John asks with a sniff.

Buck’s been cold for months, but he thinks he’ll be alright. Nothing to be done now anyways. There are no more good winter clothes to be found. He hums with a nod. John’s got his hat, and he’s got a good scarf, and that’s better than so many of the other guys who will need to go without.

They watch the cabins set aflame. Buck doesn’t feel anything, not really, but there’s something about having to leave the stable, semi-safe space they’d made for themselves to go walk in the freezing cold night that makes his chest tight.

“So that’s that, then,” John says.

“That’s that.”

They keep looking at the fire, enjoying the heat on their faces, until the Germans come to shout at them to join up the line.

Goodbye Stalag.

They're walking forever, it seems, and it's so, so cold. If Buck starts thinking about how cold it is, then it becomes even worse, so he takes to talking with Bucky, low hushed tones so the krauts don't pick up on it.

"Will you ever tell me?" he winds up asking. He doesn't know how long they've been walking but it's been hours, and his feet are soaked and cold to point where he's beginning to fear losing limbs to trench-foot.

John knows what Buck wants to know. Gale's only ever asked a handful of times, but he's always been rebuffed. Gale wants to know what happened to him those lost days between the Münster attack and the time he arrived at the Stalag. Gale had to watch him deteriorate, back when he arrived – from mostly okay to developing that nasty fever from infection. The vertigo that wouldn't abate. The bruising that looked lurid. The nightmares.

Maybe it's the cold, or the exhaustion, or the boredom of only seeing the back of the men's heads or their boots on the ground, but Bucky just sniffles in his jacket collar and says "What d'you want to know?"

And that's that: Gale learns there was a few days of hiding on farmland, going 'round with no clue where to escape. Then there was the river, water freezing, and John hiding in the reeds to escape farmers. Getting caught. John says it easy enough, like it's an afterthought, but then his eyes get lost somewhere far away, and he tells him about the bombed village. Bucky says the people rioted. He says they cracked his head open with something and kicked him when he was down. Bucky says they killed everyone else; The only reason he lived was an empty magazine, and an angry man with a piece of rubble, who thought it'd be just as well to kill him by caving his head in.

Buck feels a bit queasy hearing it all. There's something about surviving death by the grace of something so trivial as an empty gun. He can imagine it, John hurting, John bleeding, alone.

"Jesus, John." There's plenty of stuff he wants to add. He has questions, too, because Bucky's account of the events is a little spotty, and Buck thinks 'the goddamn head wound.' But if he stops John, the man will clam up, so he elects to stay quiet and wait it out.

“The poor bastard was praying too loud,” John clucks his tongue when he recounts waking up in the cart with the bodies. He rubs the palm of his hand a few times against his cheek like something’s bothering him there, but there’s nothing. “I played dead and they just – bashed his head in.”

More scrubbing at his face.

The awful feeling at the pit of Gale’s stomach is pity. It turns into dread when Bucky talks about his re-capture.

“The interrogator knew about you. He knew… he knew we were friends. He knew I cared about you. He kept bringing you up, and I thought – ‘is he laughing at me cause Buck’s dead? Or is he trying to get me to talk in exchange for information about Buck ‘cause he’s alive?’ And I hoped. Fuck, I hoped you were alive.”

It brings a chill to his bones to know that those nazi fucks knew enough about them to leverage each other’s safety against information. Buck lets himself bump against John’s side. It’s reassuring to feel him solid and present. Enough to ward off the bad thoughts. Bucky absentmindedly scrubs at his face again, and this time Gale catches his hand on the way down and wraps his fingers around his wrist, pressed snugly where his pulse is gently bumping against his skin.

“Anyways. The bastard wanted me to talk, and I didn’t, so they loaded all of us on a train, and then they had us walk to the camp, and then here I am,” he shrugs, voice rough. He shifts his arm so that his hand catches Buck’s and he squeezes once before letting go, burying his fingers in the folds of his coat.

After that the cold and the exhaustion catch up to them, and they walk the rest of the way tense silence.

The Germans funnel them through an iron gate and into some sort of factory. A few hearths are lit inside the buildings, and they all pile together. Buck spies Brady and Hambone, who strayed during their walk. Hambone looks seven kinds of grey and green, and John clicks his tongue with some measure of worry. “Told him he shouldn’t have eaten that.”

That night they sleep shoulder to shoulder, bodies crushed together in the sardine can that is the heated room. The bodies make it marginally warmer, and the fire helps, but they’re too far from the fireplace to feel the direct heat. They shiver the cold from their limbs. Some poor

souls cry through the night; frostbite and pain and illness. John slips his hands into Gale's and rubs them together to generate a little bit of pitiful heat. Nobody even minds them a glance – some men have crawled into each other's coats, pressed into each other to keep warm, so the slightly charged air around them goes unnoticed even when they give into the pull of intimacy and Gale allows his head to fall on John's shoulder.

If John dreams during the night, it's too quietly to wake Buck up. They're both so exhausted that sleep takes them quick and easy.

The next day in the train, Buck watches John wrap himself around poor Solly, who shakes in terror at their arrival in Nuremburg, and he feels like the ever-present dread that's been growing in his chest since they've left their camp's just about to burst.

It's yet another march, and at least it's less freezing, their own planes are shooting at them, and John's going ballistic. Looking at the bodies of their peers on the frozen ground, Buck decides that he can't stay there anymore. But first, he has to keep his man from getting killed by the krauts. So, he throws himself in with the guys wrangling John, who's fighting against them like a rabid dog with a scary sort of single-mindedness. It's like he doesn't even register that there are four of them trying to keep himself from getting killed.

He shakes him by his coat collar, trying to get John's eyes to meet his, to break through the manic haze. "John, look at me – look at me," he tries to infuse as much of his Major voice into it and it seems to work; John's hands come up to clench into his coat in return and his whole face is one pained, angry scowl. "I'm in." he says. They're both trembling from the cold and the fading fear from the shots. "I'm in."

Bucky's eyes burn against his. They're breathing each other's air, gulping breaths and exhaling clouds of vapour in the cold night. "Calm down before they put a bullet in your head."

Bucky pushes him away, not hard, just a last burst of pent-up energy. There's something steely in the way he looks at Buck after that, solid determination.

They get their chance at escaping the next village they find; it's half crumbling, and the streets are too narrow for the great bulk of soldiers walking through. They outnumber the Germans by some numbers, and so there is a tense feeling about the air, like a powder keg about to blow. John stops their little group with a hand on Gale's sleeve.

They've got to take advantage of the unrest. Now's the best time to try. He tracks the nearest Germans with his eyes, all busy with other guys or disgruntled civilians.

Gale very well intends to go last and close-up the march, but John's faster. He calls out "you get going, I'm right behind you," and it would not be the best time to argue with him about it (though from what he hears from Brady, he and John once got into it arguing who would bail out first). He sends the man a look and he turns around, heart beating so hard it feels like it's trying to get out of his chest. His palms are sweaty, and he doesn't run fully, doesn't want to risk it, but there's a prickling on his neck that raises the hair from his skin, and –

"No don't shoot!"

John's voice echoes in a panic. A shot. He turns where he's straddling the wall and John has a German soldier wrestled to the ground on the rubble. The rifle teeters between them, shoved and pulled. Buck is almost back down on the right side of the low wall, but John throws a look over his shoulder, eyes wide.

"Go Buck, get outta here," he calls.

There's a second where Buck has to make a choice, and it's a second that he spends straddling that wall, eyes on John, who's not coming – *he's not coming, he's telling Buck to go*, with his hands sweaty on the stone and nausea on his lips. He can't clearly make out the look on Bucky's face in the dark but it looks like desperation and fear and *fuck*.

Fuck!

He tries to convey everything in one fleeting look: 'I love you, and I'll see you again, and we'll fly together again, I promise. I need you to be strong and wait for me to win that goddamn war and get you out of here, I love you, I love you.'

And then he's slipping off the wall and downhill to the treeline, leaving John behind with the krauts in a burst of gunfire.

Buck's going home, and he spent the last few days being walked and driven about by his countrymen, riding trains and planes out of German territory and safely back into the allies'. Well actually Buck's going back 'home' to England, not back home to Wyoming, but it might as well be for how used to Thorpe Abbotts he got with time.

He hasn't slept well since the escape.

It feels odd to be safe after all those months. He wakes up moderately warm, and the blisters on his feet are healing. He's eating three times a day again, and he got to wash, even though he had to put on his old stinking clothes again afterwards.

Still, sleep doesn't come easily, no matter how comfortable he is. He misses Bucky like you'd miss a limb. It's a sharp, constant pain somewhere between his ribs. He's been making himself sick with worry, metaphorically and, in an incredibly awkward manner, physically on that first day out of German hands (that might have been the overwhelming food, though). He has nightmares that leave him awake and panting; he dreams of John, shot dead in that ruined street, or sometimes still alive but wasting away for years until he's nothing but a ghost in an unending war.

He hops on a plane headed to Thorpe Abbotts feeling like he's twice as heavy as he left off. It's a little surreal to be back in the air out of his gear, unfamiliar with the aircraft. He feels… strange about seeing the long fields around the base when they approach and begin their descent. There are men milling about on the tarmac, and it's odd to think that most of them will be men Buck doesn't know – people who'll have never met or heard of him in return.

Only England never ceases to surprise him, and both Crosby and Rosenthal are waiting for him when they land. Seeing them perched on a jeep sharply reminds him of Bucky's much beloved car, of riding shotgun while John sped off without a care in the world. Some voices raise up when a few engineers recognise him and he spots Lemmons' curly head emerge from behind a pile of parts, looking still very young and wide-eyed.

They all look good, Cros and Rosie and Lemmons. There are a little more lines to their faces, but that's expected after a year. He has half a thought to be embarrassed by how he looks, with his ratty winter clothes and his grey complexion. But then he decides that really, it doesn't matter much.

He sees them look over his shoulder, and he knows what they're expecting – *who* they're expecting. He feels the now-familiar pang of loss strike deep in his stomach. Bucky's not there, and there's something awfully soft and understanding in Crosby's face when they realize.

“What’s this for,” he clears his throat and gestures at the forts currently flying low overhead, dropping what looks to be hundreds of small crates instead of bombs. It’s a funny picture. He learns it’s for the Dutch, and that they’re looking to broker a flak-truce with the krauts for a back-and-forth trip to drop supplies. He wishes more than anything that they’ll ask him to fly it.

And they do, later, when he’s knelt next to a bunk that used to be his, knees stiff and creaking like an old man. He reverently opens the top off his lockbox, something wet and burning up his throat and nose and behind his eyes when Crosby gently tells him that Bucky wouldn’t let them send it to his family. He carefully moves his things around, hand stopping on a familiar bottle. He smiles when he brings it to his nose. His aftershave. It smells like himself, something somehow deeply reassuring.

All his letters are in it, pictures he kept, some tchotchkes he’s amassed through the years. His books are neatly stacked, and he even peaks an old pack of cigarettes at the bottom. And tucked under some safety pins, carefully laid out, is a single two-dollar bill with two of its corners ripped. His hands feel detached from his body when he picks it up.

Oh, *John*.

He clearly remembers giving it back to John, after that first Bremen attack. He remembers John flying with it on the Regensburg mission. The man had taken it out of his pocket in Telergma, had run his fingers over its well-worn sides and said a quiet prayer for Biddick. John held onto it, but somehow, when he’d packed Gale’s stuff in the box, he left it behind.

John’s a betting man. John’s a superstitious man. And he left this for Gale to find a year after the fact. Gale bites the inside of his mouth to force himself to move, to do something, instead of wallowing and contending with the realization that his best friend who he’s desperately in love with didn’t think enough of himself without Gale to care about coming back from that mission.

“Be nice to get behind the yoke again,” he tells Rosie, voice rough. It’s the truth, but it rankles to think Bucky won’t fly with him. He folds the bill and safely hides it in his pocket.

“So, Bucky didn’t make the breakout with you?”

“No. No, uh,” he manages to get out, feebly, “Bucky had to stay

behind with the men."

"He's okay, though, right," Crosby asks.

"Yeah," Gale sort of wants to cry. Because he doesn't know, does he? He left him there in that prisoner march. And before, well. Bucky wasn't okay before. Bucky hasn't been okay for a long time. But Crosby and Rosie don't need to know that. They want to be reassured. And Major Cleven is nothing if not a good leader. "When do you ever know him not to be okay."

Crosby's smile is tight, and Rosie has a pensive look about him, but they don't ask any more questions. The bill stays a heavy weight in his pocket the rest of the day.

Weeks turn to months. Buck learns to live with John's absence. Or rather he learns to survive it. On base he sees John everywhere; people ask Gale about him, and his picture is tacked to the wall in their base bar. His initials are carved into a tree amongst hundreds of other men's. Gale keeps walking around Thorpe Abbotts and half-expecting him to be waiting around a corner and sling an arm over his shoulder like he's done a million times.

There's no clear idea of what the situation on the ground looks like for prisoners of war, but scuttlebutt goes that multiple camps are retreating further inland, further into German territories.

Buck thinks about his men often. He thinks about Brady and Solly and Crank, and whether they and Bucky are still forced to march. At the very least, Buck ponders, with the seasons slowly changing from winter to spring, he hopes that the weather is kinder on them.

Buck's not a religious man, but he finds himself praying pretty often that the boys make it through. (He always, always asks God to keep John safe.)

The day Buck flies to the Netherlands on that peace mission, John's bill is safely tucked into his coat. They don't end up needing it after all; the krauts let them fly over. It's strange to see them milling about casually under the belly of their fort, no flak or smoke in the air. They make their way over the sprawling Dutch fields, and they drop thousands of crates and bagged goods in rough 'chutes.

The Dutch wave their arms at them, specks of colours against the

green. Men and women, children too, some on their roofs to greet them. The energy in the Fort is joyous, and Buck feels himself smile. It feels like it's been years. There's a warmth in his chest that comes with doing good that doesn't abate the whole trip back. Their whole formation is intact – not one fort down, not a bit of damage (save for a malfunctioning engine, and Kenny must be shaking his head in dismay).

The good mood lasts all the way back to Thorpe Abbotts, and Gale is so busy thinking about how John would have been tickled pink to run this mission that he almost misses his cue to contact the Clearup Tower.

And here's the thing. Gale spent the last few good years of his life listening to one man talk. John's a professional yapper, and his favourite victim has always been Buck, whose long-suffering demeanour has never stopped John from just chattering away.

Buck knows his voice like he knows the back of his hand.

But it's so jarring to hear it on the radio when, as far as he knows, Bucky's rotting away in Germany that Buck asks the Tower to repeat its instructions, completely thrown off-kilter.

"Oh, you heard me the first goddamn time, Gale," Bucky repeats, and Gale can just hear the pleased smile on his face when he says it, the bastard. Bucky. *Bucky*. Called him Gale, too, and it probably says something about how surprised Buck is that he doesn't even think to feel vindicated at having him call Gale by his name.

"Well, I'll be damned," he exhales incredulously. He looks at Rosie, because it might still be one very bad hallucination, but the man has a smile plastered on his mouth and he also looks surprised.

Buck's never felt like he wanted off his plane more than in that moment.

John's standing on the runway, hands on his hips with a smile like a cat that's got the cream.

After months of separation he looks like a vision, still wearing his kriegie clothes like he's just gotten off the plane and the first thing he did was come to Gale.

"Did you miss me?" John yells against the wind and the distant noise

of the engines.

Buck barks a laugh and he doesn't even spare a thought for Rosie, slipping out of their Fort; he goes where John is in long strides, and they embrace something fierce. John almost loses balance at the impact, and he stumbles back with a choked laugh. It's shocking how light he's become, even more so compared to Gale's newly recovered weight.

"My favourite pebble," he says in John's neck, and he feels the man smile against his skin in return. His hair is greasy, and he smells like a man who's had to wash with soap scraps for several months. His hands are inexplicably full of scabs, but he looks… fuck, he looks happier and fuller and more like himself than Buck's seen him in months.

He very much wants to kiss him square on the lips but he can't, not with so many people watching. Doesn't stop John from grabbing his face between his hands (still warm) and quickly smacking a kiss right on Buck's forehead, in a more appropriate gesture between close friends. He's smiling like a lunatic when he leans back, still entangled in their embrace.

"Jesus, Buck, it's good to see you."

They finally step out of their hug, and they shake hands for good measure.

"How was it to be back up there," John asks, and Buck can only smile. He wants to say that it was amazing. He wants to say that he felt alive for the first time in a very long time. He wants to tell John that it wasn't the same because he wasn't there.

"Felt good. Germans didn't blow us up to high heavens, so good. I think," he raises his finger, suddenly remembering something. "Here," he fishes Bucky's lucky deuce from his coat-flap, where it's been pressed against his heart the whole flight. "You forgot this before Münster, you dummy," he aims for funny, but it ends up fondly exasperated. Buck slips the bill into John's hand.

Bucky gently flips it in his fingers, huffing a short laugh. His eyes are very bright. "Left it for you. Knew you'd be back and flying someday. Worked, didn't it?"

Gale cuffs him around the head as carefully as he can and Bucky ducks too late, safely slipping his bill into his dirty, raggedy leather

jacket (the same he arrived at the Stalag with – the same one replacing his sheepskin).

The rest of the peanut gallery descends on them like hyenas, cackling at John, playfully welcoming him back. There are relieved smiles everywhere, and fond embraces from Cros and Lemmons and Rosie, and John's smile has his eyes pinching at the corners into dozens of new little lines.

"John Egan," Crosby saunters over. He still looks pale, even though he hasn't had airsickness in a long time, and Bucky seems to notice his complexion because he pokes at him in good fun.

"Not still throwing up in there, are you?"

"No," Crosby laughs as Lemmons wanders over. He was always more Buck's boy-wonder engineer, but John's always liked the kid. Maybe because he was so young.

"Kenny," John exclaims, pleased as punch. "Finally got bored of the oil stains and decided to come explore the skies?" He reaches up like he's going to ruffle the kid's hair but then reconsiders and just heartily clasps his hand.

"Yessir."

"How was it?"

Lemmons smiles and Buck can feel the echo of how it felt flying for the first time. It was both terrifying but electrifying all the same. "Most gorgeous thing I ever seen, sir," he says. "But to be candid, I still prefer working on 'em with my two feet on the ground."

"Ha, good man, Kenny. We need you to keep those Forts running anyway."

"Tell you what Lemmons," Buck cuts in "all that work you do for us? Keep our ladies in the air? You want to fly again you come and see me – we'll figure out something." He throws a wink to their boy and Kenny ducks his head, face flushed.

Rosie's last, ever the steady presence, but he has some mischief on his face when he shakes hands with Bucky. They two of them will get on like a house on fire, Buck's sure. They'd only known each other for a few days before John went down, but the last few months taught Buck that Rosenthal is a dancer and a singer and a menace with a drink in

him, and so he endeavours to try and keep them both in check when they inevitably get together.

“So, what’s next for you, Major,” Crosby asks.

John laughs has a touch of hysteria to it, and he rakes his hand through his curls with a shrug. “Dunno,” he says. “I guess I’ll do whatever they need me to.”

Something soft and mollified makes itself known against Buck’s chest because he knows exactly how it feels to be back suddenly after so long. He’s well acquainted with trying to catch up, with not knowing exactly what he is, now; what he’s meant to do.

“I’m sure we can find something,” Buck steps in, slinging his arm around Bucky’s shoulder. John looks sideways at him for a moment, then nods, looking both grateful and fond.

“Don’t worry Major; the 100th Band is still going strong, so worst case scenario, we can get you a singing gig. I hear you’ve quite the voice,” Rosie comes to perch himself on John’s other side.

“Oh, please no,” Gale moans, all for show. “Don’t get him started Rosie, for the love of God.”

John starts humming a tune, leaning into Gale’s space so that he basically feels the vibration of Bucky’s voice into his shoulder, into his ear where he’s obnoxiously butchering some song. That soft, gooey feeling in his chest intensifies. They turn on their heels, John now crowing into the wind, John on one side and Rosie on the other, Ken and Crosby closing the march.

Gale feels an unbearable sense of hope.

They’re sitting together in the dark, quietly passing along John’s flask. That’s new – Gale drinking – but he figures if there’s one time to pick up the habit, it’s celebrating the end of this goddamned war.

“You know, you told me, way back when – you told me that people would only ever know this new you. The one from after the war.”

“Yeah,” John says softly, dark blue eyes almost black against dim-lit sky.

“And that’s true. But also. I knew you from before. And I know you

from after."

Bucky tilts his head back on his chair to look at him, exposing his throat. He hums with a slow blink. Like a big cat. Except, Gale can't think about cats right now, because cats remind him of soup, and that's enough to have him cap the flask and hand it over, stomach roiling.

"So how do I measure, 'now-Bucky' to 'past-Bucky'?"

The question stumps him for a moment, and he has to think about it, really. But he finds that the answer is pretty simple, all things considered.

"I think 'now-you's quieter. And more cautious. I think you calmed down a lot. But these aren't bad things. Just means maybe you'll sit with me more often instead of going' dancing and singing and twirling gals around," he says, still caught in John's curious gaze.

The man snorts, and Buck continues: "I think you're one of the bravest men I've met. That didn't change. Reckless, and that didn't change, either. Selfless."

"Meaner."

"Meaner?" His eyebrow raises and he considers it. Meaner… maybe. But they all are, he thinks. John's maybe more jaded. Maybe a little more sarcastic than he started. But still. "No," he decides, "you're a sweetheart, Bucky."

Bucky's cheeks are very red, and that might be the nerves, or it might be the alcohol. Very endearing either way.

"There's one of us that's sweet, it's you buddy," John extends his arm to rest on the chair's back, hand gently reaching for the back of Gale's neck. It makes goosebumps rise on his arms. "You know I met you at basic, and you were such a shy kid. Didn't talk with anyone, didn't dance. Real quiet-like. I thought you were the sweetest thing."

"And now?" There's a warm sort of suffused feeling creeping in his chest, up his throat.

"Still think you're sort-a quiet. But you're a leader, now. You stepped up, and you learned how 'ta speak up when it counts. And I'm grateful, Buck," John's thumb is scratching at the hair at Gale's nape. "I noticed. The men did, too. Kept all of us sane and in-check, even

me."

There are flare guns being fired, and John's eyes are shining gun-metal grey and flinty against the lights.

"It wasn't a hardship taking care of you, John."

"No, it was." John's mouth twists unhappily. "I know it was, and I'm so… thank you. For being there, and being patient, and keeping me safe. I'll try to make sure you don't regret it."

Buck can't even contemplate a world in which he would regret making sure John survived.

Back on that train, on their way to Stalag XIII, Buck told John that the last few years would have been rougher without him there. And looking back at it, Buck thinks that without John he probably would not have made it at all. He thinks of them both, two pieces on either side of a scale, balancing each other out. He thinks about mutualism. Obligate mutualism – one species cannot live without the other.

"You know in training, you were so damn loud, you know that?" Gale reminisces. "All the time, and you were always moving. Used to drive me insane," he chuckles.

John snorts and he leans his body, so they're properly pressed together. Buck shivers and the other man's eyes follow the shape of his shoulders, the faint tremor of his arms. Buck grabs the flask back from his hands and he takes a long drink for courage. It's a burning slide down his throat and he coughs against the discomfort. He doesn't get how people enjoy this. John comes to pluck it out of his grasp and their fingers brush.

"Do I still today?"

"You drive me up the wall," he says, schooling his features in a serious scowl. "Back at camp, you – it was strange, to see you like this. So quiet and, and slow. There were a few times you got on my last good nerve, Bucky. But," he concedes, "John I would have done anything to keep you alive and by my side. I would have – even on your worst day, you were the best part of waking up, of going to sleep, of eating." Buck reaches to grab at John's thigh. "I could never regret you. I don't think I know how to be myself without you, so. I could never regret having you with me."

The revelation sits between them. It's not entirely quiet out, still

echoing with the sounds of flares and distant music. John clears his throat quietly, and his hand comes to rest on his lap, just an inch away from Buck's, so close he can feel the warmth of it against his skin. There's a long pause before he speaks.

"When I got to camp, that day, and I saw the guys, I was looking for you. I was hoping, God I was *praying* that I would find you there. And then I saw you, leaning against that fence looking like… looking like the most beautiful goddamn thing I'd ever seen, Buck."

Buck feels his heartbeat quicken and a rush of heat come up to flush against his cheek. John's called him sweet, and now he calls him beautiful, and Buck knows somewhere that something's shifted between them at their fundamental core. That beating, beaten heart of their relationship is being exposed. It frightens him. But he lets John continue.

"I think, for me it was hard watching you. You were so thin already when I got there, and I was watching you waste away. There were times when I felt like," he rubs his hand unconsciously on the fabric of his pants. "I felt like you were giving up. Or maybe you were scared to make a move, and that scared the shit outta me. 'Cause I kept thinking, 'if Buck doesn't make it, then I won't make it.'"

"I was never going to give up, Bucky," he says, and he gently stops Bucky's hand with his own, taking hold of it and keeping it there.

"I know. I know it's, uh, it's unfair for me to think. But I was so set on escaping, and you wouldn't try it with me, and it felt like – it felt like we were both going to rot in there. Felt like maybe you'd accepted it."

Buck bites at his lip, unsure how to proceed carefully. "Do you understand why I wouldn't try in the beginning?"

John hums.

"I was afraid we wouldn't make it. It felt hopeless, for a little bit, and by all that's holy, John; I wanted the both of us to survive, and we would have gotten shot if we would've tried."

"Maybe," John shrugs, and Buck feels like they've reached a little impasse, where John thinks that there would have been a way forward if they'd tried, and Buck thinks there was no way they would have escaped before they did.

That's fine. Buck can live with the disagreement, if that's the worst of

it between them after the most challenging time of both of their lives. John looks… a little raw, and a little vulnerable. For all that he's an emotional guy, John's never struck Buck as the type of man to talk about his feelings, to complain bout his state of mind. Perhaps it was Buck's mistake at the Stalag; letting him get inside his own head and not forcing him to talk about it, not pushing about what happened after the bailout, about how miserable he felt every day.

He squeezes Bucky's hand. "They did end up shooting at us, when we made a run for it," he tries for levity, and it works.

John chuckles and squeezes his hand back. "Kraut couldn't aim to save his life, though. Missed you by a mile." He closes his eyes like he's reliving the moment.

"I don't know, the one you took down seemed pretty steady," Buck pauses with a smile of his own. "Thank you, for saving my life, by the way."

"No thanks needed, pal," John's eyes soften. "I'm glad you made it. I spent the next months worrying, you know? Annoyed the hell out of Jefferson, poor kid. He had to handle me moping around," he sniffs, a small smile playing on his lips. "I miss him."

"Same. I mean, when John Brady showed up with the rest of your crew without you after Münster, I was pretty mopey, too, and I'm pretty sure the Colonel tried to get me drunk to cheer me up at least four times since I've come back."

"Look at us both, pathetic bunch," John moans. And then he takes a swig of his flask with a dramatic sigh. He rolls his head to look at Gale, a playful moue on his lips. "We're like, we're like bald eagles, ya know? These fuckers, they bond for life. We're like a bonded pair of eagles. Can't separate us."

"I'm not sure that's right," Gale says about the eagles. "But I see what you mean."

John looks so fond, thumb rubbing circles on Gale's hand, and the silence that falls is charged with a different type of energy. There's a fluttering, almost painful feeling in his stomach, and he feels like he might start sweating. He looks at Bucky, and his earnest eyes and open posture, and he leans in, closing the distance between them. He puts his face right in John's space, close enough that their noses are touching, but he doesn't move forward. He can't. He needs… he needs John to do it.

And the man doesn't disappoint.

John kisses him, gentle and chaste, and Gale has a quick look around for onlookers but nobody's paying attention. So, Gale takes his courage in stride and kisses him in return, something a little headier, a nip at his lip – a promise. John huffs a breathless little laugh against his mouth.

Bucky groans when they separate, and he keeps his eyes closed as he leans back into his seat. "You have no clue, Buck. No idea how long I've wanted this," he whispers with feeling. "Fuck." He rakes his hand through his hair like it's painful to think about. "I'd still. God, I'd kiss you every moment of every day."

Buck stares at him, looking so gorgeous, body tense from anticipation, and he puts his hand on John's thigh, high, high enough that it's coy, and he cocks his head in a way he knows women find attractive, close in Bucky's space, and he says: "so do something about it, John."

John doesn't say a thing. He grabs him by the hand and pulls him up. One arm goes to wrap itself against his waist, and they go like that, pressed together, to their quarters. It's empty, probably because everyone is making merry outside, drinking, dancing, fucking elsewhere. They lock the door and prop a chair under the handle for good measure. Buck figures nobody from their bunk will show up tonight, but you can't be too careful.

John grabs him as soon as it's secure and this kiss is anything but chaste. It's dirty and full of teeth and it tastes like the Irish whiskey he's been drinking, both bitter and sweet.

"I wanted to kiss you on that runway," he tells John between two breaths, "when you called in from the tower and I got off the plane, I wanted to kiss you and damn anyone who was looking."

Bucky moans a wounded sound, and he winds his arms around Gale's neck, pulling him in.

"I wanted to kiss you at the Stalag, too. Even when you looked so sad," he continues. "And when we were marching, before we left to jump the wall. I wanted to kiss you just in case."

"You'll have plenty of time for that in the future," John says, and yeah. The war is over, it's done. They're free and they have a future to look towards for the first time in a long while. "Now I want to take you to bed."

Buck doesn't have a thing against the concept, so he returns to John's lips with renewed fervour, only this time he presses his whole body into it, plasters himself against Bucky until they're slotted together in a slow grind.

"Pfff, scrawny," John huffs while his hands settle on Buck's admittedly lean (not scrawny, thank you very much) waist. Buck doesn't care to mention that John is currently still thinner than him, still recovering from the continued malnourishment. Gale is honestly just glad he can't count his ribs under his skin anymore.

He kisses his neck, buries his nose against the soft skin behind John's ear. It smells a bit like smoke and soap, and – "Is this my aftershave?"

"I did tell you I liked it," John says, unabashed by his little thievery. His hands are travelling, exploring Gale, untucking his shirt and slipping underneath. He paws at the tight skin there, and Buck takes it upon himself to shove his coat off his shoulders and undo his tie. He unbuttons his shirt, so it hangs open on his frame, while John shrugs his own coat and jumper off.

"You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," John mutters under his breath. His moustache feels coarse and ticklish against Buck's skin where he kisses him.

John kneels for him, without ceremony or shame. It's an efficient, practiced movement, and Buck wonders who else he's had like this; what other man has had the privilege to see him like that, looking up at them under his lashes.

"So pretty," he can't help but say, swallowing hard in anticipation. John's blue eyes are full of mischief, aware of just how much power he has over the situation. Over Buck.

Bucky smiles and sits back to consider him. "You ever had a fella do this for you Buck?"

"You know I haven't."

"Wouldn't have thought anything of it if you had," Bucky shrugs. Then with a salacious wink, he unbuckles Gale's belt, undoes his buttons. "Just wanted to know if you had experience, is all. Feet up," he taps at Gale's thigh and Gale slips his legs out of his pants, pushing them away. "I want to know if you," he reaches out to adjust himself in his own trousers, tenting with proof of his arousal. "- have any preferences."

“No fellow but ladies, yes,” Buck concedes.

“So you’ll be familiar with the uh, the mechanics of it,” Bucky puts it delicately and it’s a sordid thing to do, when Buck’s half naked and John’s about to have his cock in his mouth. “You can pull on my hair if you want.”

That has him twitching, awakening the concerned parts of him. “Jesus, John.”

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out,” the man chuckles, leaning forward to bite at the meat of Gale’s thigh, making him hiss and swipe at his face, pushing away to lessen the sting. “C’mon,” John taunts, shuffling forward on his knees so he’s pressed up into his space. “C’mon, Buck. Show me a good time.”

Buck can only obey.

He puts his hand in John’s hair, messes up the lather of gel holding it back. He runs it through a few times, until it’s soft and easy to grab. Through it all, John remains silent but pleased, eyes closing at the gentle petting. There’s a sharp inhale when Buck suddenly pulls. “Use your hands first, John.”

“Yes, Major,” Bucky says, breathless, teasing.

“No titles.”

“Sure, darling.” He takes hold of Gale’s cock and gives a few perfunctory tugs until Gale’s fully hard, and then he leans back in to kiss the soft skin of his stomach, setting up a rhythm with his hand. It’s an otherworldly feeling. John’s kisses have his belly fluttering, spasming against the intimate, ticklish feeling, and his grasp is calloused, rough, everything Gale didn’t know he could want out of a handjob.

After a little while John takes his hand and raises it overhead, like he’s pleading. “Spit,” he orders, and Gale does, bereft of all the air in his chest. The slide is even better after that, smooth and rugged at the same time. John is clearly experienced. He twists his wrist just so and he keeps his hold steady but not too tight. His other hand comes rest on Gale’s hip, steadying himself. The pleasure escalates and crests, and Buck has to blindly grab at John’s wrist to pull him away before he loses it. He grabs himself with a squeeze, panting, trying not to cut this whole affair short.

“Fuck, Bucky, stop. I’m gonna come.”

“That’s the idea, isn’t it?” John taunts, but he takes his hand to undo his own pants, slipping his hands through his briefs. “Make you come?”

Cheeky little brat. Gale shakes his head and presses a thumb to John’s lip. “Yes, but I want your mouth. You told me to show you a good time. Is sucking cock your idea of a good time?”

John groans, the hand in his pants speeding up. “You gonna give it to me or not?” John impatiently pants against him, finally freeing his cock from the confines of his clothes. He’s aching hard on his knees, Buck can see, and he has half a mind to do something about it. But John wants him, and who is he to refuse him.

With one hand cupping his chin, he feeds him his length. John’s mouth is wet and soft, practiced in the way he takes it all in stride, adjusting his posture so he leans all the way into Buck, nose poking at the happy trail up his stomach. Gale thinks he might come undone there and then, buried in Bucky’s mouth, and his hands both come up to cradle his head, digging into his hair.

“Christ. Christ.”

His hips twitch forward by reflex, which makes John gag against him, jostling his body, and Buck pets his hair in quiet apology. John doesn’t seem deterred by it though – he readjusts himself on the next way down and this time he slides all the way, breathing deep and slow against his navel.

“Oh, Bucky.”

The man smiles at him when he pulls off, lips wet and red and very, very kissable, so Buck does; he leans down and licks into his mouth. John pushes his face away with a laugh. He starts off again, slow and deep, making a game out of trying to take Gale all in, gagging a few times still but not looking terribly annoyed about it. There are a few tears gathering at the corner of his eyes from the strain, and Gale tuts, pulls at John’s hair to pry him away from his task and thumbs them away, gentle as a kiss.

Bucky sets off a faster rhythm, breaking it ever so often when he hollows his cheeks, gives kitten-licks at the head while he peers up at Buck behind wet eyelashes. Whatever he can’t wrap his lips around go in his spare hand, stroking in time. Bucky’s other hand leaves his own

cock to reach around Gale, pawing at his ass and then pushing him forward, so that Gale is lightly thrusting to meet John halfway.

It's obscene, and wet, and the noises they make echo in the otherwise very silent bunk. He can't help but drive himself forward, John now still and just *taking it*. Both of his hands are digging at his thighs and it's just too much, too much at once, God.

He doesn't even get to warn Bucky before he's spilling like a schoolboy, and it makes John sputter and cough, still mustering a valiant effort to swallow everything. He pulls back with his face a mess of tears, drool, and – Jesus – Buck's come.

"Sorry," Buck sheepishly chuckles, uses his shirtsleeve to brush away the worst of it.

"Warn a lady next time, would you?" John smirks, and his voice is ragged and rough. He stands on unsteady legs, knees creaking. He's still aching hard, and Buck's never… he's never tried to do this for a man.

"I don't really know how to, uh," he tells John apologetically, gesturing down. "But I can try."

"Nah," John gives him a blinding smile, coming close and leaning down to kiss him. "I'll teach you someday. For now, I just want. Your hand, please."

"Come here," he beckons, and John steps into the circle of his arms and loops his own around Gale's neck. His breath is damp and hot against his throat. Gale wraps one hand around his waist in return and tugs him as close as he can, while his other hand snakes between them to grab at John's cock, red and wanting between the flaps of fabric from his pants. He closes his fingers around him, not too tightly, and John sighs heavily with pleasure.

"C'mon Bucky, c'mon," he whispers in his ear, and John makes a noise in the back of his throat when he starts thrusting against Gale.

Then it's John just rutting in the loose loop of his fingers, hips slapping against his side, still tightly embracing him. His body feels like one huge, exposed nerve, alight with a thousand feelings. Every breath is a breath he shares with him. They're so tightly wound together that Buck can't rightly tell where one man ends, and the other one begins.

For such a loud man, Bucky's surprisingly quiet when he comes. He just shudders with a whole-body tremor, hanging off Buck's shoulders, letting him take on the weight.

"There you go," he says. "So gorgeous, John."

"Fuck. Gale." John kisses his neck, bites at the soft shell of his ear in a way that makes Buck's knees go weak. He's panting and his whole body is loose in Gale's arms. "The things I want to do with you."

"We'll have to do that another night. We didn't even make it to the bed," Buck says, wiping John's seed off his skin with his ruined shirt and discarding it off the side, a little dazed from the sex, a little dazed from the drink. John laughs, loud and earnest, and he pushes at Gale until he falls back into one of the bunks.

"I'll take you to a real bed like a proper dame, Buck, promise. When we get home. I'll give you the full experience. We'll have more fun," he lets himself practically fall on top of him, and the air goes out of Buck's chest with a 'oof' when he accidentally elbows him in the stomach. "Sorry," he says, repositioning himself so he's braced over him.

"That a promise?"

John's eyes soften, and he brushes his knuckles across the bridge of his nose, the ridge of his eyebrows, the soft skin under his jaw. John's hair looks a mess, curls catching the dim light like a dark halo.

"Promise."

"We'll have plenty of time now," Buck says, and he's granted another full smile, one that makes the corner of John's eyes crinkle and shows his teeth. He wants to see that smile for the rest of his life.

And, as John carefully tucks himself close to fit in the frankly too-small bed, covering Gale with his body like a heavy blanket, Buck feels very hopeful that he will.

Epilogue

The walls are creaking against the wind, but the old structure doesn't yield. It's been standing for half a century, and more than likely will stand for half a century more.

Safely cooped up inside, Buck can hear the pitter patter of the rain against the roof and battering the window. It's still very early, and the room is cast in a dark blue light. John's breathing softly by his side, still deep asleep, and Buck is too cozy to move and start his day, so he lets his thought flow and his eyes travel; the books stacked on the desk, most belonging to Bucky, who enjoys comedy and romance, a newspaper, folded and shoved under one foot of the old dresser (otherwise it swayed), the forgotten teacup on the nightstand.

It's decorated like Buck has always decorated his room – sparsely but homely, not terribly tidy. The wall behind the bed is a light green and the bedcover is a quilt from a relative back in Wyoming. It is, by all intents and purposes*, their* room, although it's important for any stranger who might enter to understand it as Buck's room; John's is straight across and similarly decorated, though they never use it. It exists to fool people into thinking they're two military men who share a roof to save money. Two good friends who split their quarters, and nothing more.

A glance up would show Buck the wooden crucifix over the door, which continues to befuddle him. John's a good catholic boy except for when he's not – Gale's never seen the man in mass their whole military career, but he's worn that cross around his neck under his tags every day. Buck plays with the chain absentmindedly, metal warm against his fingertips.

It's a blessing to get to have it all, he muses; John first thing in the morning, his naked body, so warm – Gale runs his hand up his thigh and down the curve of his waist, feeling the grooves if his spine, all the way up to his nape, where he buries his hand into the dark curls that are getting out of hand.

John's recovered his weight and he's letting his hair grow and his chin is stubbly these days. The nightmares are rare enough that they've both stopped looking haunted from the lack of sleep. Though on some nights like this one, Gale still wakes up slightly disoriented, not knowing why he's awake.

Bucky snuffles in his sleep and shuffles closer to him, fitting his too-tall body against Gale's flank. It brings a smile on his lips. Bucky is a little spoon after all.

It's hard to think about the war sometimes, but it gets easier to remember the good parts of it with every passing moment. Grief at their losses turn into nostalgia for the people they knew. Bucky

reminds him every day that there are good things that came from those years. Important things. Things that make life worth living.

“Goddamn thunder,” John drowsily mumbles under his breath, awoken by the rumbling outside. He doesn’t open his eyes and blindly gropes at his side until his hand catches Gale’s leg, patting his knee and settling there.

“Hm,” Buck kisses his naked shoulder. “’gonna be a day in, I think.”

The thunder rumbles twice as hard just to punctuate his statement, and John groans again. Makes Gale laugh and kiss him on the lips this time. He dislodges himself from Bucky’s grip and walks off the bed, still stark naked, and stops by the bedside to slip on his watch and ring. John gently swats at his behind as he walks away.

“C’mon Bucky, I’ll make coffee.”

“Tyrant. Won’t let me sleep.” John sits up in the bed, scrubbing at his eyes. He watches Buck put on his pants and sweater with rapt attention, and Gale can’t deny that it’s flattering to be watched so closely.

“Thought that was the thunder.”

“Yes, that, too.”

“Poor John,” Gale coos, poking fun as he slips on his socks and throws John’s pullover on the bed.

“And he takes no pity on me. What kind of house-husband are you,” he moans.

Gale and he can’t get married by law, but they’ve been toying with the idea, with the dream. Sometimes John will call him ‘husband’ and Gale feels… well he feels like a husband.

“Kind that won’t leave any breakfast for you if you don’t get up, Egan, c’mon.”

“Flapjacks?” John finally rolls off the bed in all his naked glory.

“Depends. Are you gonna burn them again?” He snipes.

“Oh, ha ha,” John crows, pulling on his clothes and looking still very much rumpled from sleep. He comes to where Gale’s been leaning in the doorway, right under the crucifix, and kisses him square on the

mouth. “Don’t know how I put up with you; you’re so mean to me.”

“I’m sweet to you. Don’t lie, you loon.” Gale smiles against his lips.

“Hm-hm,” John hums dubitably, “well it’s true you are sweet.”

Gale grabs at his face, squeezing his chin in one hand like John does to him so often. “I am. But you are the sweetest, darling.” He kisses him again, slowly and carefully. John looks mollified when they break it up. “Now come help me with breakfast.”

“I do like watching you cook.” John starts off towards the kitchen, swayed by Gale’s sweet-talk.

“You like watching me from behind, you mean.” And ogle his ass, Buck knows damn well.

John gives him a winning smile and a saucy wink, scratching at his stubbly cheek.

Buck loves the man to death.

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